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Auburn Board Takes Full Curricular Control, Dissolves Faculty Senate

The policies mirror the directives laid out in HB 580, which doesn't take effect until October and doesn't apply to the institution.

By Emma Whitford

Effective Friday, the existing Auburn University Faculty Senate is disbanded.

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The Auburn University Board of Trustees on Friday gave itself complete control over course offerings, curriculum, degree requirements and academic credentials while eliminating shared governance at the Alabama land-grant university. Faculty say they have serious concerns about the policies and a host of unanswered questions about what the changes will mean in practice.

The two policies, passed unanimously without discussion, mimic what Alabama House Bill 580 will require of other public institutions when it takes effect in October. As a land-grant institution created and governed by the state Constitution, Auburn isn't explicitly bound by the law, but lawmakers have made veiled threats to punish noncompliance anyway by withholding state funding for offending institutions. The university appears to be taking a page out of Texas public institutions' playbook by pre-emptively

overcomplying with new state law, experts say.

Effective Friday, the existing Faculty Senate is dissolved. It already held an advisory-only role, but its replacement—the Presidential Academic Advisory Council—"is a shift from faculty-led governance to administratively controlled consultation," the Auburn American Association of University Professors chapter wrote in a statement. The council will "provide advice and perspective, at the President's request and direction, on matters related to academic policy, academic governance, and the academic mission of the University," as well as "confidential" advice on other matters, according to the policy. The body may not issue any public statements on behalf of the university.

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The council will comprise two faculty members from each college—one elected by the college's faculty and one appointed by the president—as well as "additional members appointed by the President, who may include faculty or nonfaculty members whose expertise, institutional role, or perspective would assist the Council's work," the policy states. In making his appointments, President Christopher Roberts may consider "academic discipline, rank, tenure status, research activity, instructional experience, administrative experience, accreditation expertise, student-success responsibilities, institutional service, collegiality, and other factors."

Mark Criley, a senior program officer in the department of academic freedom, tenure and governance at the AAUP, called the changes "the end of shared governance" at Auburn.

"If you're designing that body and selecting half of its membership, then you're losing the frank, candid, informed judgment of the faculty," Criley said. He's especially concerned about the "collegiality" mention, which suggests that faculty members who

raise difficult questions or more frequently challenge leadership might not be selected, he said.

The policy leaves many questions unanswered, the Auburn AAUP said in its statement, including whether the existing faculty handbook will remain in effect; what it means for promotion, tenure and dismissal processes; and what protections, if any, exist for faculty dissent.

The second policy approved Friday gives the board “ultimate authority” over curriculum, course offerings and degree requirements at Auburn. It is “intended to promote academic transparency, quality, accountability, institutional alignment, responsible stewardship of the public trust, and appropriate faculty engagement while preserving clear lines of authority for final institutional decision-making,” according to board documents. Trustees are already using their new authority to direct the provost to create a civics requirement for all students that includes at least one U.S. history course and one civics class.

The board “recognizes the important role of faculty expertise in curriculum development, course design, academic review, assessment, and continuous improvement,” the policy states. It goes on to say faculty have the primary responsibility to “deliver” academic programs and that Auburn’s curriculum-development processes should allow faculty to give advice and recommendations, but that “curriculum and courses are institutional matters subject to … final approval through the authority of the Board or through such administrative delegation as the Board may authorize.”

The policy also appears to pre-empt any potential challenge from Auburn’s accreditor: “No external standard, recommendation, norm, action, or process shall limit the Board’s authority over institutional curriculum and course policy matters or require the University to act contrary to law or Board policy,” the policy states. Auburn’s accreditor, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, requires that faculty have primary responsibility for the “content, quality and effectiveness” of the curriculum.

Auburn faculty members learned about the proposed changes when the board meeting agenda and materials were published online Thursday morning, a month after the spring semester ended and a week after the materials were supposed to be made public. Virginia Davis, chair of the Faculty Senate and nonvoting faculty representative to the board, alluded to the short notice in her comments during Friday’s vote.

“Whenever you want to do something or make a policy, you really need the input of people who are living that role. And my concern here today is that the faculty did not really get a chance to give that input,” Davis said. “I’m concerned it will have adverse consequences for research, teaching and service. I know that you have the best of intentions, but I’m just concerned that because there wasn’t enough time for the engagement of faculty members involved, that it will actually set us backwards in tremendous ways.”

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In its statement, the Auburn AAUP echoed Davis’s sentiments.

“These policies were adopted without meaningful faculty input, despite the fact that faculty—not the Board—carry out the academic mission every day. Faculty are not employees in a corporate structure to be managed through top-down authority. They are experts entrusted with educating students and advancing knowledge, and that work depends on collaboration, shared governance, and strong academic freedom protections,” the Auburn AAUP wrote. “Where these conditions are weakened, unintended—and potentially spiraling—consequences are not only possible, but likely.”

Auburn provost Vini Nathan told faculty that implementation of the new policies will begin in the coming weeks, according to an email obtained by *Inside Higher Ed*.

“This work will include timelines, procedures, and guidance for curriculum review, course approval, syllabus expectations, core curriculum review, and the formation of the Presidential Academic Advisory Council,” Nathan wrote. “Auburn is strengthened by faculty whose expertise, dedication, and scholarship sustain the excellence of our teaching, research, and service to students. As this work moves forward, it will be

guided by academic quality, intellectual rigor, educational excellence, and clear communication so that the resulting processes reflect both institutional purpose and the values that have long shaped Auburn's academic community."